



LESSONS IN LIVING

“Finding Your Way”

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Rev. Babs Miller and Emily Clifton
July 20, 2025

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 43: 1-3a;13 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

“But now, Leah and Rachel and Jacob, hear the word of the Holy One - the One who created you, the One who fashioned you, Israel: Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the seas, I will be with you; When you pass over the rivers, you will not drown. Walk through fire, and you will not be singed; Walk through flames and you will not be burned. I am the Spirit of Love, your God, The Holy One of Israel, your deliverer. I am God from all eternity, and no one can take you from my hand. What I do, no one can undo!”

Sermon

Rev. Babs Miller

I want to thank Emily Clifton, a member of our church, for being willing to come today and share her story. We all have stories. We all have many different stories. We all have stories about how we finally came to this particular church. Today, Emily is going to share her story with us.

You grew up in a church, going to church with your family, didn't you?

Emily Clifton

I did. I grew up going to church every Sunday in a couple of different churches. When I was pretty young, we started attending a very large church that preached a prosperity gospel of “*Do, say and believe the right things, and God will make your life perfect.*” That felt very different from the churches we had attended before. It felt like love compared to the rules that I had been taught in prior churches. I continued to attend that church for many years because that's what I thought love was.

Babs: When did all this begin to change for you?

Emily: Over the years, I did start to see that there were conditions placed on that love. There were rules to have to follow. There were lifestyles that were acceptable. There were very clear roles for men and women to fill in life. I started to wonder about some of those, especially after I graduated high school. I spent two years with the ministry, and then decided I didn't want to work at churches my whole life. And so, I went to nursing school, and started working as a nurse. After a few years working as a nurse, I decided to go on my first mission trip, because that's what you do, especially as a good Christian health care provider.

I went to Kenya, and we did a week-long clinic. At the end of that clinic, I realized two things. I realized that the people that I was interacting with there seemed much happier than most people in America, who supposedly had perfect lives in our wonderful country. I also realized that we had provided care to a bunch of people and given them a month's worth of medication for their chronic illness that was never going to go away. When I started asking, *"Well, what good does it do to give a month's worth of medication, and who knows if they'll ever get care again?"* The answers I got from the people who had planned that trip in different leadership was, *"Well, at least we did something."* And that didn't really make sense to me, so I continued to ask some questions.

Then a few years later, in 2017, I heard about an organization who had opened a field hospital in Iraq to take care of civilians that were coming out of Mosul, as the Iraqi army was retaking the city from ISIS. And I thought, that is absolutely crazy. There's no way I could go there and do that.

And two months later, I found myself at the airline counter trying to explain to the clerk that, *"Yes, my final destination is Erbil, Iraq. I am getting on a plane to go serve."*

I ended up spending three weeks behind twelve-foot glass walls at a hospital working in the operating room with American and Iraqi surgeons, taking care of patients.

My first day there one of the Iraqi surgeons looks at me and goes, *"You know it's not safe here. Why did you come?"* The only response I could give him was, *"Well, my God says to love. This is how I'm showing love."*

I finished my three weeks there, and I came home and tried to go back to normal life in Houston and attending church services that were highly produced and would end up walking out of those services because all I wanted to do was be back in that tent in the desert.

And it was really challenging to then be asking questions like *"How did I end up in a middle-class family in Houston, Texas? And these children ended up in Mosul while ISIS was ruling in the city?"* I didn't have a lot of very good answers for them.

Babs: So did you ever seek outside help with your struggles?

Emily: I did. I ended up going and finding a therapist to talk with about all this, and just asking these questions. And it ended up with many days of me sitting in her office and going, *"I think I have to leave this church that I've spent the majority of my life at. I don't know how to leave. I*

don't know what to believe. I don't know what to do.” As I was asking those questions and still trying to figure out what to do, COVID hit and everything got shut down. And so it was very easy to put those questions on hold a little bit because going to church wasn't an option.

During that time, I then decided to go with that same organization to work in New York and care for patients there. And that was a very conservative organization, and they had some requirements to be able to go work with them. You had to sign a couple of pieces of paper saying that you agreed with their beliefs that a marriage was between one man and one woman, and that life began at conception.

I had signed those papers in 2017, agreeing with those beliefs. By 2020, I was questioning and not really sure, but justified it by saying, *“Well, I'm not really sure. I don't know a solid answer, so I'll just sign the paper and say that I agree so that I could go help people.”* And that's what I did.

While I was in New York, I ended up working part-time in a hospital in the city. And one day, I had a conversation with one of the nurses who worked in that hospital full-time. He was very kind. We could not have done the work that we were doing without his help. But he looked at me and he goes, *“So what do you all actually believe? Because my friends are telling me that this organization holds some interesting beliefs. I don't have time to read the news. I don't know what to think. So can you explain to me?”*

I had to look at him and say, *“Well, this is what this organization believes, and this is what we say that we agree with to be able to work with them. But of course, we're here to help everyone and take care of everyone.”* And I left that conversation never wanting to have to justify beliefs that I didn't fully believe in and defending an organization that I didn't fully agree with.

I got back to Houston, and it was challenging to come back to Texas after seeing what I had in New York. By the early May, Texas was re-opening (from the COVID lockdown) and acting like it wasn't that big of a deal. And that's when I decided I could never go back to that church, and didn't know what was next.

A year later, I ended up moving to Austin, because I didn't know how to stay in Houston and not be a part of a church that had been my social circle for 19 years. When I came to Austin, I found a church here that was much smaller and seemingly more progressive and held different beliefs and thought, *“Okay, I think I can fit here.”* I attended there for a couple of years until it started to feel too much like what I had been a part of before. And at that point, I said, *“I'm done with church. I've got to figure out what do I believe. And I don't know if I can ever find a church that I feel comfortable and at home with. And so, if I never attend church again, okay, this is it!”*

Babs: And yet you came to St. Andrew's.

Emily: I did. Six months after deciding that I was done with church, I was listening to a podcast, and the title of the episode was *The Texas Rep: Fighting Christian Nationalism*. And I heard James Talarico talking all about the work that he is doing and how it was based on the faith that he was raised with. All I could think was *“Well, that's what I believe, and I agree with that. And*

that's the type of church I could be a part of if I were to ever go to church again. But I'm still not ready to go to a church!"

Then about a year later, as the election was approaching, and I was feeling very apprehensive just knowing all of my family and their beliefs and things that I've been involved going, *"I don't feel good about this."* And I heard one of the sermons that James had given here and decided to look up St. Andrew's and go. *"Where is it? Oh, it's 10 minutes from my house!"* (Laughter) I thought, *"Well, maybe, but not yet."*

But when I was looking, I saw that they had a singing and prayer service scheduled for the day after the election. And so I just had that in the back of my mind of like, *"Well, maybe."* And then, the day after the election, I was feeling so upset and wondering what was going to happen in my life, personally, as a single woman working as a nurse in labor and delivery here in Texas. *"I can't stay home. I can't be alone tonight."*

And so I came, and I pulled in the parking lot, and there was not many cars, which meant *"Okay, I'm about to walk into a room where everyone's going to know that they've never seen my face. And I don't know if it's time for that, but I also don't want to go home. So I guess I'm just going to go in, and this is better than being at home alone. And even if no one talks to me, at least I won't be alone."*

I sat down and Babs came up and asked, *"How are you doing?"* And I go, *"as good as I can be today."* Then she sat next to me and stayed sitting next to me during the whole service. I was introduced to quite a few people that night, and I got to listen as they shared their stories of their concerns of how this was going to impact their lives.

And I also got to hear as other people got up and said, *"Yes, I hold privilege because of who I am, and I'm going to use my privilege to protect vulnerable people."* And that was something that I had not heard in a church, being willing to acknowledge both sides of the story and say *"we're here together to take care of each other."*

Babs: What would you like folks here to hear and take with them from all this?

Emily: I would like everyone to know that changing beliefs is possible, but it's hard and it always costs something. My immediate family and I have done a lot of work to stay in contact and stay close. My relationships with extended family has gotten much more distant, and I'm no longer in contact with anyone from that church that I attended for 19 years.

There are two quotes that I came across as I was reading a book by Rachel Held Evans called *"Searching for Sunday"*, which really helped me to come to terms with my experience. The first one is, *"I left a church of kind, generous people because I couldn't pretend to believe things I didn't believe anymore."* I never believed that people at my former church were trying to hurt others, but I do believe they were not able to see the harm that they caused. And the second quote is, *"There's a difference between caring and healing, and I believe the church is called to the slow and difficult work of healing. We are called to enter into one another's pain, anointed as holy, and stick around no matter the outcome."* That's what I've seen happening here at St. Andrew's.

Babs: I think we all can identify with parts of her story because we've all struggled to find community. I think we're built to be in community, but it's hard to find community where you can feel loved and accepted no matter what you believe, as long as you believe in love. And so, I want to leave you with part of the scripture as an ending for what we did today. We leave you with these words because they speak to all of us, I think.

"I have called you by name. You are mine. When you pass through the seas, I will be with you. When you pass over the rivers, you will not drown. Walk through fire, and you will not be singed. Walk through flames, and you will not be burned. I am God from all eternity, and no one can take you from my hand. What I do, no one else can undo."

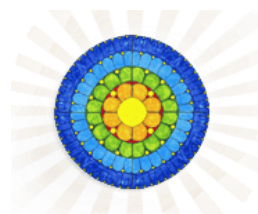
I invite you now to your own thoughts on these words.

Benediction

Rev. Babs Miller

I would remind each and every one of you that each of you is a child of that wonderful spirit of love that we sometimes call God. And that spirit knows when you skin your knee or your heart. That spirit knows when you admire a butterfly or cry in the darkness. So go out into this wonderful creation and tell the whole world that they are loved just exactly as they are. Go and kiss the hurts of this world. Go and laugh and play in the fields of grace and love. Go in peace. Amen.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



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